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INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN CULTURE

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It is generally accepted that what Benedict called the Dionysian configuration of Plains culture represents a dominant, if not the only trend. By definition a configuration is a generalization lying behind and explaining a number of cultural patterns. A pattern itself is of course an abstraction from the behavior of a number of individuals. The behavior of any one person may vary at different times in respect to a particular type of situation, but it is unlikely that the individual will show the whole range of possible behavior within a pattern; it will cover only a portion thereof. As Linton pointed out, the difference between the individual mode within this segment, and the mode of the behaviors on which the pattern is based, reflects the compromise which every individual has to make between the culture patterns of his society and his own inclinations. It would seem further, then, that if the modes of an individual's behavior-ranges show a consistent displacement with respect to a large series of patterns, it is safe to assume that the direction of this displacement reflects some quality of the individual.[1] The question we wish to raise is this: If the aspect of personality thus revealed runs counter to a dominant trend of his culture, is the individual a misfit in that society?

In attempting an answer, let us examine some individual variations within those patterns of Plains culture in which expression of emotional excess, and dangerous experience were expected of women in one Plains society, that of the Gros Ventres of Montana. We shall outline in some detail the behavior of one Gros Ventre woman in respect of these selected patterns—from which the Dionysian configuration was abstracted—and contrast her behavior with that of others of approximately the same age. All had participated as adults in the old way of life before the disappearance of the buffalo in 1887.

In Gros Ventre culture, as in all the Plains, there was high valuation placed on direct contact of the individual with the supernatural through dreams and visions. Men could actively seek such contact by employing dangerous means, and did so in order to obtain many kinds of power. While women did not go on the actual power quest, they might acquire medicine powers and less frequently, perhaps, powers of clairvoyance. Medicine powers were considered dangerous in that, it was believed, by accepting them a limitation was put upon the life span of the practitioner. But the rewards in terms of prestige for successful performance and of payment for services were high for women as well as for men. Not every individual man was successful in his quest, nor of course was every woman vouchsafed the kinds of dreams which were requisite. Coming Daylight, the woman whose behavior we are examining in particular, was what her contemporaries considered fortunate indeed in having been offered curing powers of several kinds. Nevertheless she rejected the possibility each time, in spite of the fact that she had a living example in the person of her father's sister of what it could mean in prestige to a woman who accepted. As the reasons for her refusal seem significant I shall describe her experience in her own words.

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and, each time he attempted to get to his knees, one of two women who had already reached the scene would strike him on the buttocks with the flat side of a hatchet, making an insulting remark, and both would laugh. Coming Daylight hesitated at some distance from where the other two were gloating over the fallen enemy. When one of them, Woman Chief by name, saw her she ran to her saying: "Why are you standing so far off?" She grabbed her by the arm and pushed a big club into her hand, saying: "He is still alive—you will do a great thing. *Ahe:ya'!*" Woman Chief forced Coming Daylight to strike him.

While both Woman Chief and Coming Daylight closely approximated the ideal for women as faithful wives and efficient workers who gave generously of their material goods to and on behalf of their relatives, they seemingly differed in temperament. Woman Chief was known as a very brave woman, and Coming Daylight was frank in admitting she would never have dreamed of doing the kinds of things for which Woman Chief was renowned. One of the latter's exploits, for example, was as follows. The Gros Ventres and Crow were allies in an encounter with the Piegan. The battle was in full force, but one Crow had withdrawn and was sitting motionless astride his horse at some distance from the melee. Woman Chief, who in contrast to most women was always well mounted, dashed up to the Crow, grabbed his wand from his hand, and rode pellmell into the thick of the battle, counting coups right and left. So brave was she considered in having really risked her life that she was accorded the distinction, most unusual for a woman, of being led around the camp circle with the victorious warriors. Furthermore, so many people came to sing in front of her lodge that she and her relatives, to show their appreciation of the honor, were forced to give away as much property as though she were a man. Judging on the basis of other biographical material, there can be no doubt that she gloried in her reputation and took every opportunity to enhance it. She was one to whom the more violent aspects of Gros Ventre culture were exceedingly congenial.

If we compare and contrast these two women we can say that insofar as the patterns of Dionysian configuration are the basis of the comparison, their behavior exhibits opposite extremes, the one going beyond the average in the direction of the configuration, the other running counter to and participating less than the average therein. Both might be termed deviant personalities in Honigmàn's sense of the term,[2] one overplaying and the other underplaying modal behavior in these selected patterns. Nevertheless, neither seems to have been a misfit insofar as each represents an extreme of socially accepted or sanctioned behavior within those patterns. If, for instance, Coming Daylight had been completely negative, and refused, say, to carry out at least the culturally defined minimum for mourning, had she, in addition to refusing to mutilate herself for the recovery of her ill relatives, neglected as an adult even the safe and less strenuous means to that end, she would have fallen without the pale, so to speak, and have been a misfit. If, at the opposite end of the scale, Woman Chief had gone further in the direction of masculinity, had she actually gone on raiding expeditions and herself stolen horses from the camp of the enemy, had she learned to shoot the bow and arrow or gun, or had she so much as adopted the vocabulary and/or pronunciation proper for males in the Gros Ventres language, she would have been carrying things too far. She, too, would have been dubbed a misfit.

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